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ABSTRACT

Despite national demands to improve the weak literacy skills of young adults, educators and policymakers lack the diverse types of data needed to make changes. The report, "Workplace Competencies: The Need to Improve Literacy and Employment Readiness," points out that past measures of literacy have lacked comparability, resulting in no accurate way to determine if Americans today are more or less literate than they were 20 years ago. Because of the complexity of society, literacy assessments should take into account that different life and workplace tasks require varying levels of competency. The 1986 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that most young adults can read, but a large percentage cannot solve problems presented to them in formats simulating real-life situations. Focus should be on the skills workers need today and not on uncertain projections of future job-market demands. The findings have these implications for policymakers: (1) the most pressing literacy problem is the large number of adults who can read but lack information processing skills; (2) tests are needed that assess real-life literacy skills; (3) schools must develop student proficiency in real-life tasks; and (4) better measures are needed to evaluate the nation's literacy progress. (YLB)

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Executive Summary

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Looking at America's Literacy Skills

America is not a Nation of illiterates, as some have claimed. Nevertheless, large numbers of young adults lack the literacy skills necessary to perform moderately complex tasks, such as using a bus schedule or following written instructions.

Despite national demands to do something about the weak literacy skills of young adults, especially those entering the work force, educators and policymakers lack the diverse types of data needed to make changes. This is the message of *Workplace Competencies: The Need to Improve Literacy and Employment Readiness*, a paper commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI).

The authors, Paul E. Barton and Irwin S. Kirsch of Educational Testing Service (ETS), point out that past measures of literacy have lacked comparability, resulting in no accurate way to determine if Americans today are more or less literate than they were 20 years ago.

The level of skill needed to function adequately in society has increased steadily. A century ago, literacy was determined by the simple ability of the individual to sign his or her own name. By the end of World War II, anyone who could read at the fourth-grade level was considered literate. During the 1960s, reading at the eighth-grade level had become the benchmark for literacy.

Society is now more complex, making it impossible to rely on such simple factors to determine the extent of literacy in America. The authors stress that this complexity also makes it unrealistic to designate a single score on an assessment test as the dividing line between literacy and illiteracy. Rather, they believe, literacy assessments should take into account the fact that different life and workplace tasks require varying levels of competency.

What We Do Know

The 1986 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), conducted by ETS and funded by the U.S. Department of Education, found that while most young adults clearly can read, a large percentage cannot solve problems presented to them in formats simulating real-life situations. NAEP, which included a nationally representative sample of young adults ranging from high school dropouts to Ph.D.s, revealed that the majority were able to perform routine or uncomplicated tasks. However, only a small percentage could do moderately complex tasks. This means that a great many of them are not prepared for the job market.

The same was true for those with only a high school education—except that, here, a still smaller percentage were proficient at performing the moderate or relatively complex literacy tasks in the NAEP assessment.

For example, just 27 percent performed at a level where they could do such tasks as locate information repeated in a lengthy news article. Even fewer—11 percent—were able to perform tasks such as using a bus schedule correctly. Thirty percent were at a level typified by the ability to compute the cost of a meal from a menu. When this task was made more difficult by asking them to compute the exact amount of a 10 percent tip, only 13 percent were at the level for this task.

Understanding the difference between being able to read print and being able to use printed materials to solve daily problems is crucially important to those developing school curricula and those developing adult- and workplace-literacy programs.

More Than Literacy Needed

For some time now, employers have been wringing their hands over the generally lackluster abilities of young adults applying for entry-level jobs. Creativity, the ability to listen and comprehend instructions, communication, self-discipline, and teamwork are just some of the workplace skills many of today's workers need, but lack.

Despite the importance employers attach to such qualities, they have not yet become part of any large-scale literacy assessments of students and young adults. Thus, no data exist about the extent to which new workers possess these broader

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skills and understand their importance or the extent to which schools stress these qualities. No existing information suitably defines the levels of literacy required by specific occupations.

The Future Workplace

Most agree that a large gap exists between the skills workers have and those the workplace needs. However, there is some disagreement over whether that gap will grow in the future. According to recent projections from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest growing occupations in terms of percentage increase are those that generally require more education. But the actual numbers of such jobs are relatively small.

On the other hand, the 10 largest growing occupations in terms of numbers of jobs are salespersons, registered nurses, janitors, cleaners, waiters, waitresses, managers, general office clerks, secretaries, nursing aides, orderlies, truck drivers, receptionists, and information clerks. Because most of these occupations do not require advanced education, it is unclear whether, on average, educational requirements will increase significantly in the future. Further, past occupational projections have not proved very reliable in predicting the future.

Regardless of what the future holds, the fact remains that the literacy skills of today's workers are not adequate to meet the needs of today's job market. It makes sense, then, to base efforts to improve literacy skills on current needs, rather than on uncertain projections of tougher job requirements in the future.

Implications for Policymakers

In summary, the findings have the following implications for policymakers:

1. The most pressing literacy problem is not widespread illiteracy. Instead, it is the large number of adults who can read at some basic level, yet lack the information-processing skills necessary to carry out the moderately complex tasks of everyday life. For this reason, educators must be careful to distinguish between strategies used to increase literacy levels and those used to teach reading. Policymakers must decide whether to seek better ways to teach the current curriculum or whether to rethink what is taught and how it is taught.

2. Since literacy tests currently are linked to classroom reading exercises rather than proficiency in "real world" tasks, better tests are needed to assess literacy skills as they develop during the school years. New measures are only one step, however. Those who diagnose literacy needs and develop and operate literacy programs must understand the difference between classroom reading proficiency and real-life literacy requirements. New programs must do more than teach students to read; they must raise *literacy levels* as well.

3. The impetus for immediate action should be today's needs, rather than uncertain projections of future job-market demands. Besides improving the literacy skills needed for today's work world, young adults must acquire other aspects of "employment readiness," including proper attitudes, communication skills, and the ability to work in teams.

4. To increase literacy, as defined in this paper, schools must broaden instructional practices to include the development of proficiency in the kinds of real-life tasks used in the NAEP assessment. Students must learn to read, but they also must acquire the ability to respond to the many problem-solving tasks that jobs and life demand.

5. Better measures and tools are needed to evaluate the Nation's literacy progress. Useful assessment instruments can be developed that go beyond literacy as it is now measured. Literacy assessments themselves should include more of the types of tasks encountered in work places. Further, literacy should be assessed regularly and with the same methodology, so that educators can know whether it is improving or declining. Finally, literacy requirements of specific occupations should be defined in order to determine the levels that must be achieved for each.

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For information about ordering a copy of the full report, *Workplace Competencies: The Need to Improve Literacy and Employment Readiness* (Publication No. IS 90–987), contact OERI, Education Information Branch, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20208–5641. Please include the publication number with your request.

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